Jeff Thomson

Thomson International Inc., Kern County

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The Thomson family takes a lot of pleasure from the many wildlife species thriving in fallowed fields near return sumps throughout their Kern County farmland.

Taking Advantage of Fallowed Fields

Ask any farmer from Fresno south where annual rainfall is often just four inches and they'll tell you: Southern San Joaquin Valley farming requires an entirely different mind set and some creative farming systems.

"High summer temperatures, limited water supplies, and sparse ground cover causes soil to be prone to wind and water erosion. These conditions require farmers to use extreme care in selecting crop rotations and corresponding field operations, from ground preparation to harvest" says Jeff Thomson, a Bakersfield area farmer who grows everything from garlic, wine grapes, and carrots to cotton and alfalfa on his 1,500-acre farm.

"We've got to be darned efficient and creative to survive. Remember, in the late 1800's most people farmed and only a few percent lived in cities," remarks Thomson. "Today, most people live in cities and we're down to the less than one percent who farm in California and you're not going to survive if you run a sloppy farming operation."

Thomson contends, however, that "the last one percent" still have plenty of opportunity to help wildlife without hindering their farming efficiency. As a chairman of the Tulare Basin Wetlands Association, Thomson has been working with other growers to maintain, enhance, and restore wetland habitat for waterfowl and other wildlife in the Southern San Joaquin Valley.

"I like to fallow fields as part of my normal rotation program," says Thomson. "By planting a grain crop I can help restore and conserve the soil and use the land creatively for wildlife."

Thomson plants fallowed areas in wheat, barley, oats, or a combination of grains. The growing vegetation, he has observed, provides excellent nesting habitat in the spring. He has made a practice of locating fallowed fields close to his return sumps.

"Every spring I see duck broods on the sumps containing runoff from my fields," says Thomson.

These agricultural sumps are available year-round. During the spring and summer they function as small ponds for duck and shorebird broods during the crucial early weeks of their lives.

When willows and other trees started appearing naturally near some of these sumps, Thomson's ranch manager was worried they'd affect the farming operation. He was surprised by the results. "We only grow the trees in areas where they won't interfere with farming," Thomson points out, "and they haven't caused problems. It's not unusual to see doves, quail, songbirds, owls, and hawks there."

Thomson, a former president of the Kern County Farm Bureau, would like to see more widespread use of fields that are out of production.

"Planting a grain crop on fallowed areas makes good farming sense at the very least, " he says. "The cover helps restore soil nutrients and reduce the effects of repetitive disking, wind erosion, and water erosion. The remarkable range of wildlife I see on fallowed fields with cover near sumps is proof that this practice is also terrific for wildlife."